

Antigone

Background Info

Author Bio

Full Name: Sophocles

Date of Birth: 496 B.C.E.

Place of Birth: Colonus, a village outside of Athens, Greece

Date of Death: 405–406 B.C.E.

Brief Life Story: Considered one of the three greatest playwrights of the classical Greek theater, Sophocles was a friend of Pericles and Herodotus, and a respected citizen who held political and military offices in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. He won fame by defeating the playwright Aeschylus for a prize in tragic drama at Athens in 468 B.C.E. Only seven of his complete plays have reached the modern era, but he wrote more than 100 and won first prize in 24 contests. Best known are his three Theban plays, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles's other complete surviving works are *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachinian Women*. He is credited with changing Greek drama by adding a third actor, reducing the role of the chorus, and paying greater attention than playwrights before him to character development.

Key Facts

Full Title: *Antigone*

Genre: Tragic drama

Setting: The royal house of Thebes

Climax: The suicides of Antigone and Haemon

Protagonist: Antigone

Antagonist: Creon

Historical and Literary Context

When Written: Circa 442 B.C.E.

Where Written: Athens, Greece

When Performed: Circa 441 B.C.E.

Literary Period: Classical

Related Literary Works: Of Sophocles's surviving dramatic works, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* treat different episodes of the same legend, using many of the same characters. Sophocles's writing career overlapped with that of Aeschylus and Euripides, the other great tragic playwrights of fifth-century Athens. Among Aeschylus's best-known tragedies are *Seven Against Thebes*, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. Euripides's most influential works include *Medea*, *Electra*, and *The Bacchae*.

Related Historical Events: *Antigone* was performed sometime around the year 441 B.C.E., just before Athens fought a campaign against the revolt of Samos. Sophocles was selected to be one of nine generals in that campaign. These historical events are relevant because some of the play's central issues are the appropriate use of power by the state, the possibility of justifiable rebellion, and the duties of citizens to obey the laws of their government. A long-held tradition suggests that the popularity of *Antigone* led directly to Sophocles's election as a general.

Extra Credit

World War II Antigone: In 1944, when Paris was occupied by the Nazis, Jean Anouilh produced a version of *Antigone* in which the audience was able to identify Antigone with the French Resistance fighters and Creon with the occupying forces.

World War II Antigone 2: The German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht produced a version of the play in German, in 1948, which had even more obvious references to the Nazis. Brecht's version of the play begins in a Berlin air-raid shelter.

Plot Summary

As the play begins, the invading army of Argos has been driven from Thebes, but in the course of the battle, two sons of Oedipus (Eteocles and Polynices) have died fighting for opposing sides. Their uncle, **Creon**, is now king of Thebes. He decrees that the body of Polynices, who fought against his native city, will not be given burial rites but will be left to rot, as a warning to traitors. Creon further decrees that anyone who does try to bury Polynices will be punished with death.

Oedipus's daughters, **Antigone** and **Ismene**, are grieving for the loss of their two brothers, but Antigone is also defiant. She declares that the burial traditions are the unwritten laws of the gods, and are more important than the decrees of one man. She vows to give Polynices the proper burial rites. Ismene begs Antigone not to defy the laws of the city and add to their family's tragedy. Antigone will not yield.

Antigone is caught in the act of performing funeral rites for her brother. Creon is furious, and has Antigone brought before him. She remains defiant, and says that she will not break the laws of the gods just to follow Creon's unjust law.

Creon responds that she will die for her disobedience to the laws of the city. Ismene pleads with Creon to spare her sister's life. Antigone is engaged to Creon's son, **Haemon**, and the two of them are very much in love. But Creon is as unyielding in his allegiance to the rule of law as Antigone is to the unwritten traditional rules of the gods.

Haemon comes to Creon to ask him to reconsider. The citizens of Thebes are sympathetic to Antigone's desire to bury her brother, but are too afraid of Creon to speak up. Creon grows angry at his son's attempt to offer him advice. Their exchange grows heated. Haemon insists he is trying to prevent his father from pursuing an injustice. Creon accuses his son of siding with a reckless traitorous woman over his own father, to whom he owes obedience. Haemon threatens that the death of Antigone will lead to another death, and then rushes away, saying that Creon will never see him again.

Antigone laments her approaching death and all that she is giving up in refusing to bend to Creon's law. Guards lead her away to be sealed up (alive) in a tomb. **Tiresias**, the blind

prophet, warns Creon that he is about to make a terrible mistake in killing Antigone, and that he should not leave the body of Polynices unburied. Creon flies into another rage and accuses Tiresias of false prophecy and of accepting bribes. Upset, Tiresias tells Creon that as punishment for killing Antigone, the gods will soon take the life of Creon's child. Creon is shaken by this, and eventually decides to relent. He rushes off to free Antigone from the tomb.

After Creon has left, a **messenger** arrives at the palace with the news that Haemon has killed himself. **Eurydice**, Haemon's mother and Creon's wife, asks to know what happened. The messenger says that Haemon went to Antigone and found that she had hanged herself. When Creon arrived, Haemon lunged at him with his sword, then used the weapon to kill himself. Eurydice leaves without a word. Creon returns, overcome with grief, carrying the body of his son. He cries out and blames himself for driving his son to suicide. A messenger enters with the news that Eurydice has killed herself while cursing Creon for murdering their son. Creon is left a broken man.

Characters

Antigone – Daughter (and half-sister) of Oedipus, sister of **Ismene**, niece of **Creon**, and fiancée of **Haemon**. When her brother Polynices dies attacking Thebes, Antigone defies Creon's order that no citizen of Thebes can give Polynices's body a proper burial, under penalty of death. She believes the burial rituals are the unwritten rules of the gods, and must be obeyed regardless of a ruler's political whims. She is bold in her defiance, believes firmly that she is right, and at times seems eager to die for the cause of burying her brother.

Ismene – Sister of **Antigone**. Ismene pleads with Antigone not to defy the laws of the city and not to bring more misfortune to their ill-fated family. When **Creon** sentences Antigone to death, Ismene first tries to share the guilt, and then pleads with Creon to change his mind and be merciful toward Antigone.

Creon – Brother-in-law of Oedipus, Creon becomes king of Thebes when Oedipus's two sons die while battling each other for control of the city. Creon believes in the rule of law and the

authority of the state above all else. Bending the rules leads to anarchy, in his opinion, and anarchy is worse than anything. Creon's stubborn refusal to honor **Antigone's** desire to bury her slain brother and to acknowledge the opinions of the Theban people, his son **Haemon**, and the seer **Tiresias**, leads to the deaths of his wife **Eurydice**, Haemon, and Antigone.

Haemon – Son of **Creon** and fiancé of **Antigone**. Haemon tries to convince his father to be compassionate toward Antigone and to heed the will of the people of Thebes, who don't want to see her executed. He attacks his father and then kills himself when he finds Antigone dead.

Tiresias – The blind prophet, or seer, who warns **Creon** not to execute **Antigone** and not to stick so rigidly to his decision to disallow the burial of Polynices. When Creon insults Tiresias, the seer prophesies that the gods will punish Creon for Antigone's death by taking the life of his child.

Eurydice – Wife of **Creon** and mother of **Haemon**. She

blames her husband for their son's suicide and kills herself, while cursing Creon's name.

The Chorus – In *Antigone*, the chorus represents the elder citizens of Thebes. Sophocles's choruses react to the events of the play. The chorus speaks as one voice, or sometimes through the voice of its leader. It praises, damns, cowers in fear, asks or offers advice, and generally helps the audience interpret the play.

A Sentry – The sentry brings Creon the news of Polynices's illegal burial and later catches **Antigone** in the act of performing funeral rites for Polynices's body.

A Messenger – The messenger gives an account of the suicides of **Antigone**, **Haemon**, and **Eurydice**.

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary* and *Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

Blindness vs. Sight

In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus mocks the blindness of the seer **Tiresias**, who responds by telling Oedipus that he (Oedipus) is blind to the corruption in his own life, and soon will be literally blind, too. Issues of blindness and sight aren't quite as obvious in *Antigone*, but the same basic tension is there. Tiresias gives the current king, **Creon**, a warning, and the king is unable to see the wisdom of the seer's words. Creon is blinded by pride—his unwillingness to compromise, to listen to the opinions of his people, or to appear to be defeated by a woman. The blind Tiresias can see that the gods are angry and that tragedy will strike if Creon doesn't rethink his decision and change his mind. Creon lacks the insight to see this. In that sense, he is blind. And although he does eventually change his mind, and come to see the error of his stubbornness, it is too late—events have spiraled out of his control, and he now must witness the destruction of his family.

Natural Law

Creon, as head of state and lawgiver in Thebes, believes in obedience to man-made laws. But in defying Creon's command that no one bury Polynices, **Antigone** appeals to a different set of guidelines—what is often called "natural law." Whether its source is in nature or in divine order, natural law states that there are standards for right and wrong that are more fundamental and universal than the laws of any particular society.

Antigone believes that the gods have commanded people to give the dead a proper burial. She also believes she has a

greater loyalty to her brother in performing his burial rites than she does to the law of the city of Thebes that bans her from doing so. The wishes of the gods and her sense of duty to her brother are both examples of natural law. To Antigone, these outweigh any human laws. In *Antigone*, Sophocles explores this tension and seems to suggest—through Antigone's martyrdom, the people's sympathy, and Creon's downfall—that the laws of the state should not contradict natural laws.

Citizenship vs. Family Loyalty

The concept of citizenship and the duties that citizens owe to the state were subjects of huge importance and debate in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens, where Sophocles lived and where *Antigone* was first performed. Antigone and Creon represent the extreme opposite political views regarding where a citizen of a city should place his or her loyalties.

In the play, **Creon** has a strict definition of citizenship that calls for the state to come first: "...whoever places a friend / above the good of his country, he is nothing: / I have no use for him." From Creon's perspective, Polynices has forfeited the right to a proper burial as a citizen of Thebes because he has attacked the city. In attacking Thebes, he has shown his disloyalty to the state and has ceased to be a citizen. In fact, Creon is more devoted to his laws than he is to even his own son **Haemon's** happiness, refusing to pardon **Antigone** for burying Polynices even though she is Haemon's fiancée. Antigone, on the other hand, places long held traditions and loyalty to her family above obedience to the city or to its ruler. In doing so, she makes the case that there are loyalties to both the gods and one's own family that outweigh one's loyalty to a city.

Civil Disobedience

Creon says that the laws enacted by the leader of the city "must be obeyed, large and small, / right and wrong." In other words, Creon is arguing that the law is the basis for justice, so there can be no such thing as an unjust law. **Antigone**, on the other hand, believes that there are unjust laws, and that she has a moral duty to disobey a law that contradicts what she

thinks is right. This is particularly the case when the law of the city contradicts the customs of the people and the traditional laws of the gods. Antigone's decision not to follow Creon's decree against giving Polynices a proper burial is therefore an example of civil disobedience, or a refusal to obey the law on moral grounds.

Fate vs. Free Will

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Independent prophets called "seers" saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. Oracles were an accepted part of Greek life—famous leaders and common people alike consulted them for help with making all kinds of decisions. Long before the beginning of *Antigone*, **Oedipus**, Antigone's father, fulfilled one of the most famous prophecies in world literature—that he would kill his father and marry his mother (these events are covered in detail in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*). Despite his efforts to avoid this terrible fate, it came to pass. When Oedipus learned what he had inadvertently done, he gouged out his own eyes and was banished from Thebes. Before dying, he prophesied that his two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, would kill each other in the battle for Thebes (see *Oedipus at Colonus*). This, too, comes to pass.

Yet when the prophet **Tiresias** visits **Creon** in *Antigone*, he comes to deliver a warning, not an unavoidable prophecy. He says that Creon has made a bad decision, but that he can redeem himself. "Once the wrong is done," Tiresias says, "a man can turn his back on folly, misfortune, too, if he tries to make amends, however low he's fallen, and stops his bull-necked ways." While Oedipus never has a choice—his fate was sealed—in this case Creon seems to have more free will. He chooses to remain stubborn, however, until it's too late and he is caught in the grip of a terrible fate that he can't escape.

Symbols


Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.

Antigone's Tomb

Creon chooses to execute **Antigone** by sealing her in a tomb alive. As **Tiresias** points out, Creon has ordered that a dead body (Polynices's) be left above ground *and* has ordered the

entombment of a live person. Antigone's live entombment is a symbol of Creon's perversion of the natural order of things, which violate the social and religious customs of death and meddles with the affairs of the underworld.

Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the *Themes* section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

Lines 1 - 416 (in the Robert Fagles translation)

It is nighttime in Thebes. The Thebans have defeated an invading army from Argos. During the fighting, the two sons of Oedipus, Polynices and Eteocles, have died, each killing the other as they fought for opposing sides. Polynices, the older brother, led the army from Argos in an effort to try to regain the throne of Thebes, which he lost years earlier when Eteocles overthrew him. Now that both brothers have died, the brothers' uncle, **Creon**, is king of Thebes.

This battle, one of the most famous in Greek mythology, grew out of Oedipus's terrible fate (detailed in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex) as well as the fates to which Oedipus later sentenced his sons in Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus.



Oedipus's two daughters, **Antigone** and **Ismene**, discuss their grief in the palace. The outraged Antigone tells Ismene that **Creon** has decreed that the slain attackers will not be given proper burial rites. Eteocles, who defended Thebes, will be buried with military honors, but Creon has ordered that Polynices's body will be left unburied, for animals to eat. In addition, Creon has commanded that anyone who attempts to bury Polynices's body will be put to death.

Angry and defiant, **Antigone** challenges **Ismene** to help her bury their brother Polynices. Ismene is frightened, both of **Creon's** decree and of her sister's rash words. She begs Antigone to think of all of the tragedy that has already befallen their family and to recognize that they are women with less power than men—particularly the king. She says that they must obey Creon's law.

Creon grants or denies burial rights based on the individual's relationship to the city. Anyone he sees as a traitor is denied burial. Antigone's outrage that proper burial has been denied to one of her brothers shows that she does not use the same standard. For her, loyalty to family is more important than Polynices's disloyalty to Thebes.



Ismene's resistance to burying Polynices comes not from a belief that Antigone is wrong, but from a fear of the punishment she will receive for breaking Creon's law. Ismene also knows how her family members tend to act in ways that end in destructive fates.



Antigone responds that she won't let **Ismene** join in the glory of burying their brother even if Ismene changes her mind. Though Ismene reminds Antigone that she would be defying the laws of the city by burying Polynices, Antigone argues that burying Polynices is obeying the laws of the gods, which demand that her brother be given a proper burial.

Antigone and Ismene establish one of the play's major themes. Ismene points out that Creon's decree is the law of the land. But Antigone feels that the laws of the gods are more important than the laws of men.



Ismene continues to plead with **Antigone**, but Antigone only grows angrier with her and more determined to defy **Creon's** decree. Antigone challenges Ismene to tell the world what Antigone is about to do, and then she exits. Ismene says that though she thinks her sister is irrational, she loves her, and exits.

Ismene is clearly not Antigone's enemy, but rage makes Antigone see the world in black and white. She is working herself up to the point of defying Creon's law and earning a death sentence.



The **chorus** enters. They are elder citizens of Thebes. They offer a chant to the rising sun and tell of the battle in which Thebes defeated Polynices and his attacking army from Argos. They speak of Zeus, who they believe helped to defend Thebes, of the goddess Victory, and then call on Dionysus, god of the dance, to celebrate their victory.

Antigone refers to a higher law—the laws of the gods—and the chorus here indicates how important the gods were to the people of Thebes. The chorus attributes the successful defense of the city to the gods' protection.



Creon enters and addresses the **chorus**. Creon explains that, after the death of Oedipus's two sons, he is now king, and the "ship of state is safe." He gives a speech about the character of a leader—a leader must make the soundest policies and put nothing above the good of the state. He declares that Eteocles will receive a burial with military honors, but that the body of the traitorous Polynices will not be dignified with a burial, but will instead be left out to rot, "an obscenity for the citizens to behold!"

Creon uses his first speech as king to explain his ideas of leadership and citizenship. He sees the state as more important than any individual, and thinks that as leader his most important job is to preserve the state's safety. Any action taken against the state he sees as an "obscenity" that must be punished and destroyed.



A **sentry** enters. He's afraid to speak because he brings bad news and is afraid of **Creon's** reaction, but is at last persuaded to say what he knows. The sentries have discovered that someone has given Polynices's body burial rites. The body isn't fully buried, but it is covered with a sprinkling of dry earth.

Creon's authority is immediately tested. The sentry, as the bearer of bad news, guesses that he'll be blamed for what has happened—not an unusual occurrence, apparently.



The leader of the **chorus** suggests that this might be the work of the gods. This idea sets **Creon** into a rage. He accuses the **sentry** of having been bribed to allow the burial rites to take place. He threatens to torture the sentry if the sentry doesn't find the man who buried Polynices. Creon exits. The sentry considers he's had a lucky escape, and swears he'll never come back to Thebes.

Creon, who sees the state as more important than the individual, can't fathom that the gods might not agree with him. He sees the laws of the state as so important that he would be willing to torture the sentry, who is just a messenger, in order to uphold them.



Alone on the stage, the **chorus** offers a chant on the nature of man. With their capacity for hard work and their ingenuity, humans can conquer every obstacle—except death. When a man makes laws and combines them with the justice of the gods, his city will prosper and he will become great. But when he strays from the laws of the land and the laws of the gods, he will become an outcast.

Some critics refer to the Chorus's speech as Sophocles's "Ode to Man." It is a celebration of the awesome capacities of human beings. The condemnation of men who stray from the proper laws is aimed at Polynices, who attacked the city of his birth. But note how the chorus seems to think, as Creon does, that the laws of men and god are always aligned. The events of Antigone will prove otherwise, to Creon's horror.



Lines 417 - 704

The **sentry** returns, escorting **Antigone**. He calls for **Creon** and presents Antigone as the culprit who defied the law and gave burial rites to Polynices. Creon is doubtful. The sentry tells the story of how he and his colleagues removed the dirt from the body and then sat in wait. As they watched, a sudden whirlwind lifted a cloud of dust. When the dust settled, they saw Antigone standing over the body, screaming because she saw that it was bare. She then poured handfuls of dirt on the body as the sentries came down and seized her.

Many critics have asked why Antigone returns to the body, and why she feels the need to cover it with dirt again. If she has already performed the funeral rites, shouldn't the gods be appeased? These critics argue that she seems to want to be caught in the act. The whirlwind suggests the presence of the gods, and that perhaps the gods do care about what happens to Polynices's body.



Creon asks **Antigone** if she denies this charge. She does not. Creon dismisses the **sentry** and asks Antigone if she was aware of his decree that no one should bury Polynices. She says that she was fully aware.

Antigone gives straight answers and doesn't hesitate in proclaiming her guilt. She wants to challenge Creon's law head-on.



Creon asks why she would dare to break the law. **Antigone** says that Creon's law was not the law of the gods of the underworld—the gods of death and burial whose laws form unwritten, ancient traditions. She was not going to break the laws of the gods to appease a man.

Antigone heeds the laws of custom and religion, not the laws of men like Creon. She believes she is obeying a higher power than Creon's imperfect man-made legislation.



Antigone says she knows she must die. Since she has already known so much sadness in her life, she says, she welcomes death and is not afraid of it. But she could not bear to leave her brother to rot. And if **Creon** thinks she is acting stupidly, she says, that's because Creon is a fool.

Antigone remains unwavering, even aggressive in her defiance. By insulting the king she is almost backing him into a corner so that his pride will force him to carry out the sentence.



The leader of the **chorus** notes that **Antigone** is as passionate and stubborn as her father. **Creon** responds that he will break her stubbornness, and that he refuses to let her go free, which would make it appear that he had been defeated by a woman. He declares that Antigone and her sister, whom he also believes is guilty, will suffer a terrible death.

Creon does not keep a cool head, as a wise leader should, or look for a way to compromise. He is as stubborn as Antigone. As if this were a street fight, he feels he can't back down without losing face.



Antigone is unfazed, and says that to die for the act of bringing honor to her brother will bring her glory. She adds that the citizens of Thebes support her actions, and would speak up in her favor if they weren't afraid of **Creon**. She calls him a tyrant.

Antigone again references the higher law that she follows. She suggests that Creon rules by fear, which calls into question the justice of his burial decree.



Creon asks how **Antigone** can honor Polynices, who killed her other brother, the patriotic Eteocles. Antigone responds that all people must be given the same death rites—it's what the gods command. To Creon's argument that the patriot and the traitor should be treated differently, Antigone says that, because they were her brothers, she loved both equally. Creon says she can love them in Hades.

Creon and Antigone debate whether Antigone should be loyal to the state and its laws—including its distinction of citizen and traitor—or to the gods. By Creon's logic, Antigone's refusal to follow his laws makes Antigone a threat to the state's safety that must be eliminated.



Ismene enters, weeping, and says that she will share **Antigone's** guilt, but Antigone furiously refuses to let Ismene share in the glory of dying for this cause. Ismene begs Antigone to let them die together. Antigone—harshly at first, and then more gently—continues to refuse to let Ismene claim guilt for defying Creon.

At first, Antigone won't let Ismene join her out of pride—Ismene didn't do the deed, why should she share the glory? But Antigone eventually softens. It would be pointless for Ismene to die for something of which she wasn't responsible.



Ismene turns to **Creon** and asks him if he'd really kill his son **Haemon's** intended bride (**Antigone** is Haemon's fiancée). Creon says his son can find someone new. Ismene pleads that the two are in love. Creon says that the thought of his son in love with a traitor repels him. He breaks off the marriage. Ismene continues to plead for Antigone. Creon tells the leader of the **chorus** that Antigone must die. Guards take Antigone and Ismene away.

Creon remains committed to the supremacy of his laws. If Antigone can't escape the law just because she wants to bury her brother, then Creon also won't make an exception just because his son is in love with Antigone. Rules are rules, to Creon, and a leader is judged by his ability to enforce them.



The **chorus** delivers a lyrical chant about the tragedy and ruin of the house of Oedipus. The chant then turns to the power of Zeus (king of the gods) to lay waste to fortunes and ruin the lives of great mortals. Though humans strive and strive, they but remain subject to the whim of the gods. The chant ends when **Haemon**, son of **Creon**, enters, weeping.

Fate seems to have it in for Oedipus and his descendants. They went from the height of power when Oedipus was king of Thebes to patricide, incest, fratricide, and now a sister dying for the right to bury her brother. Yet the chorus fails to see that it is now Creon who is on the verge of sentencing himself to a terrible fate. Just as Oedipus tried to fight against the fate given to him by the gods, now Creon holds up his own man-made laws as more important than the laws of the gods. In Greek literature and myth, things never turn out well for people who try to lift themselves above the gods.



Lines 705 - 1090

Creon asks **Haemon** if he comes in anger or obedience. Haemon says he will obey Creon. Creon is pleased, and delivers a lecture on a son's obedience to his father and the importance of not losing one's head over a bad woman. He tells Creon to let **Antigone** go.

Here Creon seems particularly rigid and heartless. Even if he believes he is right and his son should obey him, he doesn't show an ounce of sympathy for Haemon, who loves Antigone.



Creon says that had he not punished **Antigone's** defiance of the rule of law, it would be like inviting anarchy to destroy the city. The fact that Antigone is a woman, Creon adds, is a further reason why she must not be allowed to defy him. The leader of the **chorus** says that this sounds sensible.

Creon details his thoughts on the importance of the rule of law over other loyalties, and his belief that to allow any anarchy (or, seemingly, freedom) would threaten the state.



Haemon tells **Creon** that it's not his place to correct the king, but that the rumors in the street are that the people are sympathetic to Antigone. The people are afraid of Creon, but they believe Antigone should be allowed to bury her brother. Haemon asks his father to realize that he may have made a mistake. He pleads with his father not to be so rigid.

If Creon is a fair king who truly represents and defends his people, as he seems to believe himself to be, then he should pay attention to his people. If they don't think Antigone should be punished, then perhaps Creon should reconsider.



Creon reacts with anger at his son's offering of advice. Again he calls **Antigone** a traitor. **Haemon** says the people of Thebes do not see it that way. Creon responds, "And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule? ... Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?"

Creon thinks reconsidering would invite anarchy and threaten the state. But if he rules for himself only, ignoring his people, then how can he claim that his laws are just?



The king and his son continue to argue. **Creon** accuses **Haemon** of supporting **Antigone** against his father. Haemon responds that he is trying to keep his father from committing an injustice. The argument grows more heated and Creon hurls stronger and stronger insults at his son. Haemon threatens that Antigone's death will cause another death. At last, Haemon rushes away, saying that Creon will never see him again.

Creon's blind pride has made him fail to understand Haemon's threat. It also makes him fail to recognize that his devotion to the safety of the state has made him a tyrant whose laws defy the wishes of his people and the laws of the gods.



The leader of the **chorus** worries that **Haemon** may do something violent. **Creon** doesn't care. He decides to spare **Ismene**, but says that he will take **Antigone** into the wilderness and enclose her in a vault with just a bit of food. Either the god she seems to love—Death—will save her, or "she may learn at last... what a waste of breath it is to worship Death."

Creon's method of executing Antigone is interesting. By entombing a living person (Antigone) and denying burial to a dead person (Polynices), Creon's laws seem to go against common sense, tradition, and nature itself.



The **chorus** offers a chant about love, a force that can't be conquered, that taunts people and makes them do crazy things. Guards bring **Antigone** from the palace. The **chorus** is heartbroken at the sight of her.

She has been stubborn, but Antigone now gains the audience's pity for what she has become: a person about to die unjustly.



Antigone laments her fate, and the fact that she will never experience the joys of marriage. She further laments the horror of her coming death. The **chorus** tells her she went too far in her protests, and wonders if she is continuing to suffer for the sins of her father, Oedipus. The mention of her father and his fate stirs Antigone to more intense mourning. The chorus tells Antigone, "Your own blind will, your passion has destroyed you." **Creon** enters, and tells the guards to interrupt her lament, to take her away, build a **tomb**, and place her in it.

Antigone come to terms with the consequences of her decision, and sadness has at least for the moment replaced defiance. The chorus is sympathetic, but points out that Antigone kept pushing when she could have given up. In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus insists on uncovering the truth about his past, even when others have warned him that doing so will destroy him. Like her father, Antigone brings on her own demise.



Antigone continues to mourn her life and death. She says that she would not have done what she did—disobey the laws to bury her brother—for a husband or a child, because one may find another husband or have another child. But because her parents are dead, she'll never have another brother.

Antigone here seems to go against her earlier claim that all the dead must be treated equally. Her shift suggests that Antigone may be softening, giving Creon an opportunity to show mercy.



As she's led away, **Antigone** calls out that she is being punished for her devotion to the gods. She then begs the gods to punish **Creon** as terribly as he is punishing her if they agree with her that Creon has defied their laws.

Creon shows no mercy. Antigone calls out to the gods because she believes that their power and laws take precedence over Creon's.



The **chorus** chants about other figures of mythology who were entombed alive. All of them were kings or children of gods, yet even they could not escape their fates, just as **Antigone** cannot escape hers.

By referencing other mythical Greek figures, the chorus seems to suggest that Antigone has been fated since long ago to die like this, just as her father Oedipus was fated to kill his own father and marry his mother.



Lines 1091 - 1470

Tiresias, the blind prophet, enters, led by a young boy. **Creon** greets him and agrees to follow Tiresias's advice. Tiresias warns Creon that he is at a turning point, and that Polynices's body must be buried to appease the gods and protect Thebes from their wrath. Tiresias tells Creon not to be stubborn in his decision to refuse to bury Polynices. Instead, he should see himself as only human and capable of making mistakes.

In Oedipus Rex, Tiresias at first doesn't want to tell Oedipus his fate. Here Tiresias warns Creon boldly that he is acting against the gods. Unlike Oedipus, whose fate was already sealed when his prophecy was told, Creon can course and avoid terrible consequences.



Creon flies into a rage, cursing **Tiresias** and swearing that the body will never be buried. He accuses Tiresias of false prophecy and of accepting bribes. He curses all prophets as power-hungry.

Creon reacts to Tiresias with outrage and insults, just as Oedipus did in Oedipus Rex. His pride and rage seal his fate.



Tiresias now reveals the full secret he knows. He says that the gods alone hold sway over the dead, and that mortals may rule over the living. He says that as punishment for burying **Antigone** alive, the gods and the Furies will soon take the life of **Creon's** own child. In addition, the hatred of all those whose dead loved ones have not been buried will rise against Creon. Tiresias exits.

Creon's window of opportunity to avoid disaster has now closed. Moments earlier he might still have been able to undo what he had done, but now Tiresias predicts a tragic and violent outcome.



Creon is shaken by the prophet's words, but is reluctant to undo his decree. He asks the leader of the **chorus** for advice. The leader tells him to free **Antigone** and bury Polynices quickly. Fearful, Creon gives in. He rushes off to free Antigone himself.

Unlike Oedipus, once Creon is shaken by the words of Tiresias, he asks people around him for advice. Creon might still try to defy his terrible fate.



The **chorus** prays to the god Dionysus, asking him to protect and heal the people of Thebes.

The chorus turns to the gods, the higher power, to save Thebes.



A **messenger** arrives with terrible news: **Haemon** has killed himself. **Eurydice**, Haemon's mother, overhears the commotion and asks the messenger to tell her what happened. The messenger says that he and **Creon** first went to bury Polynices. Just as they were finishing, they heard a cry at **Antigone's tomb** that sounded like Haemon's voice, and rushed over. At the tomb, they found Antigone hanged and Haemon hysterical with grief for her. When Haemon saw them, he lunged at Creon with his sword, missed, and then used the sword to kill himself. Eurydice exits without a word, followed by the messenger.

As in most Greek tragedies, the climactic action takes place offstage and the audience (as well as some of the onstage characters) hear the news from a messenger. Frightened into changing his mind by the prophecy of Tiresias, Creon has tried to make up for his earlier stubbornness. But in Greek myth, once a fate is set in motion, remorse won't stop it. The fated person must suffer.



Creon and his attendants enter. Creon is carrying **Haemon's** body, and is almost mad with grief. He berates himself, calling himself his son's killer, and his son the victim of Creon's stupidity.

Terrible grief and suffering has made Creon realize that he has indeed angered the gods and brought this fate on himself and his family.



As Creon weeps, the **messenger** returns with the news that **Eurydice**, the queen, has killed herself. The messenger says she killed herself at an altar, while cursing **Creon** and his pride for causing the death of their son.

Now Creon's entire family has committed suicide. Even worse, they committed suicide because of Creon's stubborn pride.



Creon calls for his attendants to take him away. He says, "I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing." He prays for death. The leader of the **chorus** tells Creon that he must endure his suffering. Creon says that he has murdered his son and his wife. He's led offstage by his attendants. The chorus ends by remarking that the proud are laid low by fate, and wisdom is gained through suffering.

Too late, Creon realizes that his family defines him, not his position in the state. Without his family, he is "nothing." Creon's fate has turned out to be similar to Oedipus's—stubbornness led them both to fulfill a fate that results in the suicides of their loved ones. The chorus suggests that, like Oedipus, Creon will live with his suffering and gain wisdom from it.



Important Quotes

Lines 1-416 Quotes

I have longer
to please the dead than please the living here:
in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever.
– Antigone, lines 88-90 (Fagles)

I will suffer
nothing as great as death without glory.
– Antigone, lines 112-113 (Fagles)

And speech and thought, quick as the wind
and the mood and mind for law that rules the city—
all these he has taught himself
and shelter from the arrows of the frost
when there's rough lodging under the cold clear sky
and the shafts of lashing rain—
ready, resourceful man!
Never without resources
never an impasse as he marches on the future—
only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue
but from desperate plagues he has plotted his escapes.
– Chorus, lines 396-405 (Fagles)

Lines 417-704 Quotes

Like father like daughter,
passionate, wild...
she hasn't learned to bend before adversity.
– Leader of the chorus, 525-527 (Fagles)

Blest, they are truly blest who all their lives
have never tasted devastation. For others, once
the gods have rocked a house to its foundations
the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on
from one generation on throughout the race—
like a great mounting tide
driven on by savage northern gales,
surging over the dead black depths
roiling up from the bottom dark heavens of sand
and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,
roar, and the low moaning
echoes on and on
– Chorus, 656-666 (Fagles)

Lines 705-1090 Quotes

Spit her out,
like a mortal enemy—let the girl go.
Let her find a husband down among the dead.
– Creon, 7280730 (Fagles)

Anarchy!—
show me a greater crime in all the earth!
– Creon, 751-752 (Fagles)

Whoever thinks that he alone possesses intelligence,
the gift of eloquence, he and no one else,
and character too...such men, I tell you,
spread them open—you will find them empty.
– Haemon, 791-794 (Fagles)

Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?
– Creon, 823 (Fagles)

What a splendid king you'd make of a desert island—you and you alone.
– Haemon, 826 (Fagles)

Love, you mock us for your sport.
– Chorus, 894 (Fagles)

I go to wed the lord of the dark waters.
– Antigone, 908 (Fagles)

You went too far, the last limits of daring—
smashing against the high throne of Justice!
Your life's in ruins, child—I wonder...
do you pay for your father's terrible ordeal?
– Chorus, 943-946 (Fagles)

If a man could wail his own dirge before he dies,
he'd never finish.
– Creon, 970-971 (Fagles)

But if these men are wrong, let them suffer
nothing worse than they mete out to me—
these masters of injustice!
– Antigone, lines 1019-1021 (Fagles)

Still the same rough winds, the wild passion
raging through the girl.
– Leader of the chorus, 1022-1023 (Fagles)

Lines 1091-1470 Quotes

Then reflect, my son: you are poised,
once more, on the razor-edge of fate.
Tiresias, 1099-1100 (Fagles)

These arrows for your heart! Since you've raked me
I loose them like an archer in my anger,
arrows deadly true. You'll never escape their
burning, searing force.
Tiresias, 1206-1209 (Fagles)

Take me away, quickly, out of sight.
I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing.
– Creon, 1445-1446 (Fagles)

The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
those blows will teach us wisdom.
– Chorus, 1468-1470 (Fagles)

ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Lines
	<p>Back-story</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oedipus, king of Thebes, has four children with queen Jocasta: Polynices, Eteocles, Ismene, and Antigone. Years later, Oedipus discovers that his real parents were not the people who raised him. He is actually the son of Laius and Jocasta. He unknowingly killed Laius and is married to his own mother. His children are also his siblings. Jocasta kills herself. Oedipus gouges out his own eyes and is banished from Thebes. In Oedipus's absence, Polynices and Eteocles struggle for power. Eteocles wins the throne and exiles Polynices, who moves to Argos and raises an army to attack Thebes. During the battle, Polynices and Eteocles kill each other. Their uncle, Creon, is now king of Thebes. Creon's son Haemon is engaged to Antigone. The play begins at the royal palace of Thebes after the invading army of Argos has been defeated.
	<p>1 – 416</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creon decrees that the traitor Polynices's body will be left to rot, unburied. The punishment for burying Polynices is death. Antigone vows to bury the body. Ismene is frightened by Creon's decree and begs Antigone not to add to their family's tragedies. Antigone is defiant. She feels she is obeying the higher law of the gods, which demand proper burial rites. She grows angry with Ismene and says she no longer welcomes her sister's help. Creon tells the chorus that, although Polynices is his relative, a good leader must do what is best for the nation. Polynices must be left unburied to serve as an example of what happens to traitors. A sentry comes with the news that someone has performed burial rites for Polynices and covered him with dirt. The chorus chants about man's ability conquer every obstacle but death.
	<p>417 – 704</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sentry returns with Antigone as a prisoner. They caught her returning to Polynices body to perform more burial rights. Antigone tells Creon she was aware of his decree. She chose to break his law because it conflicted with the more important unwritten laws of the gods, which call for proper burial rituals. She says she's willing to die if she has to. Creon says he will not let a woman defy him. He declares that Antigone and Ismene, who he also thinks is guilty, must die. Ismene arrives and claims that she's as guilty as Antigone. Antigone denies it. Ismene tries to reason with Creon and begs him not to kill his son Haemon's fiancée. Creon refuses. Guards take Antigone and Ismene away. The chorus chants about the many tragedies of the house of Oedipus. People live at the whim of the gods, who can lay waste to anyone's power and fortune.
	<p>705 – 1090</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Haemon comes to speak to his father. Creon tells him to forget Antigone. He (Creon) must punish her because if people disobey the state's laws, anarchy will ensue. Haemon tells Creon that the Theban people support Antigone's decision to bury her brother, although they're too afraid of Creon to say so publicly. Haemon asks his father to realize he may have made a mistake. Creon gets angry and starts to sound like a tyrant who doesn't care what his people think. Creon insults Haemon and accuses him of disobedience. Haemon threatens that Antigone's death will cause another, then rushes away. Creon decides to spare Ismene, since she didn't participate in the crime. He decides to place Antigone into a sealed tomb alive. Either the gods will save her or she'll starve to death. Guards bring Antigone from the palace. She laments her approaching death. The chorus tells Antigone that her own stubbornness has destroyed her. Before being led away, Antigone calls out to the gods to make Creon suffer if she is right and he is acting against their wishes. The chorus chants about great mythical figures who were also entombed alive.
	<p>1091 – 1470</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The blind prophet Tiresias comes to tell Creon that he is making a terrible mistake. Creon is outraged. He accuses Tiresias of false prophecy and of accepting bribes. Tiresias prophesies that the gods will punish Creon for killing Antigone by taking the life of his own child. Creon is shaken by the prophecy. The chorus advises him to free Antigone quickly and bury the body of Polynices. Creon rushes off to free Antigone. A messenger arrives and says that Haemon discovered that Antigone hanged herself, attacked Creon, then killed himself. Creon and his attendants bring Haemon's body back to the royal house. Creon grieves and calls himself his son's murderer. A messenger brings the news that Creon's wife, Eurydice, has cursed Creon for killing their son and then killed herself. Creon is a miserable, broken man. He sees that he has been too stubborn and proud. The chorus reminds the audience that the proud are knocked down by fate, but that wisdom is gained through suffering.

Theme Key

- Blindness vs. Sight
- Natural Law
- Citizenship vs. Family Loyalty
- Civil Disobedience
- Fate vs. Free Will